THIRD EDITION

ROUTLEDGE

READING POETRY

A COMPLETE COURSEBOOK

TOM FURNISS AND MICHAEL BATH

Reading Poetry

Reading Poetry offers a comprehensive and accessible guide to the art of reading poetry. Discussing more than 200 poems by more than 100 writers, ranging from ancient Greece and China to the twenty-first century, the book introduces readers to the skills and the critical and theoretical awareness that enable them to read poetry with enjoyment and insight.

This third edition has been significantly updated in response to current developments in poetry and poetic criticism and includes many new examples and exercises, new chapters on 'world poetry' and 'ecopoetry', and a greater emphasis throughout on American poetry, including the impact traditional Chinese poetry has had on modern American poetry. The seventeen carefully staged chapters constitute a complete apprenticeship in reading poetry, leading readers from specific features of form and figurative language to larger concerns with genre, intertextuality, Caribbean poetry, world poetry, and the role poetry can play in response to the ecological crisis.

The workshop exercises at the end of each chapter, together with an extensive glossary of poetic and critical terms, and the number and range of poems analysed and discussed – 122 of which are quoted in full – make *Reading Poetry* suitable for individual study or as a comprehensive, self-contained textbook for university and college classes.

Tom Furniss retired from the Department of English Studies at the University of Strathclyde in 2017, after teaching poetry, Romanticism, and literary theory for 30 years. He is the author of two monographs on Romanticism, co-author of several editions of the textbook *Ways of Reading* (Routledge) and recently published two collections of poetry.

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‘*Reading Poetry* stands out from other poetry handbooks in its superb combination of practical guidance and theoretical savvy. Students who use this comprehensive guide will be helped to enjoy and discuss poems, introduced to some of the major varieties of poetic criticism, and invited to reflect on what makes poetry important today.’

Derek Attridge, *Emeritus Professor of English, University of York*

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Tom Furniss and Michael Bath

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and the upcoming generations of poetry readers and poets.

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‘Teaching at university level which is not also in touch with research is not university teaching.’ (John Smith, late leader of the British Labour Party, 1993)

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Preface

In preparing this third edition of *Reading Poetry*, we have tried to retain and build on the strengths of the first and second editions (1996, 2007). We have drawn on the experience of using the book as a teaching text in university courses and on feedback from university teachers in Britain, the U.S.A., and other parts of the world. We have also taken account of three anonymous reports by academics who have used the previous editions in their teaching. Many of the chapters have been substantially rewritten to reflect our ongoing experience and enjoyment of reading poetry and to acknowledge recent developments in academic writing about poetry. We have included many new poems that draw on our continuing exploration of poetry's rich history and the ongoing creativity and innovation of contemporary poets throughout the world. Some of the exercises at the end of chapters have also been rewritten or replaced. More substantial changes include the omission of two chapters on contextual issues – 'Poetry, Discourse, History' and 'The Locations of Poetry' – because they seemed dated and we no longer found them interesting enough to try to refresh them, and the inclusion of new chapters on 'World Poetry' and 'The Poetry of the Earth'. These new chapters, along with many of the revisions of other chapters, have enabled us to give a lot more attention to American poetry than in previous editions, together with an exploration of traditional Chinese poetry and its impact on poetry in the West.

This third edition of *Reading Poetry* also has a new subtitle. We now call it *A Complete Coursebook* rather than *An Introduction*. This change reflects our sense that the book contains everything required for a university course on poetry and that it is much more ambitious and substantial than 'An Introduction' implies. Teachers and university lecturers might use it as a course text or as a resource for their own teaching. The main intended readers are undergraduate and postgraduate students of literature who are taking college or university courses on poetry. The book seeks to equip students with the tools, skills and critical awareness that will allow them to analyse and interpret poetry in ways that will, hopefully, help them make insightful contributions to seminar discussion and write excellent and well-rewarded essays and exam papers.

Although we begin our discussion of each aspect of poetry in an introductory fashion, that initial treatment is usually developed into an analysis of subtle

and complex effects and theoretical implications in a range of poems. Each chapter is devoted to a specific set of skills, formal features, and theoretical questions and usually attempts to place them in a historical framework. To a certain extent, therefore, each chapter is a discrete, self-standing unit. The sequence of the chapters is carefully staged, however, so that each chapter builds on what has gone before and prepares readers for later chapters. These often return to poems or issues discussed earlier to develop a new point in the context of the new issue being discussed. *Reading Poetry* is a complete course-book, then, because it treats, at length, every aspect of poetry that readers need to be aware of, and alerts readers to the history of poetry and critical and theoretical thinking about poetry along the way. The book does this by discussing more than 200 poems by more than 100 writers, ranging from ancient Greece and China to the twenty-first century. Of these 200 or so poems, 122 are quoted in full. There are also substantial quotations from some of the most important long poems in the language – *Paradise Lost*, *The Prelude*, *Leaves of Grass*, 'The Schooner *Flight*', and so on.

As well as covering most aspects of poetry and presenting readers with a substantial number of poems, *Reading Poetry* can claim to be a complete course-book because each of its seventeen chapters ends with two or more exercises which invite the reader to test out what has been learned in the chapter. As noted, some of the exercises have been changed because we believe we have found better or more appropriate examples than those in earlier editions. The present edition has also increased the number of these exercises to cover the ground more fully, to test more of the skills and techniques that have been discussed or sometimes to deal with aspects of a topic that have only been glanced at in the chapter. Some of the questions are more leading than others, though the aim of the exercises is always to enable readers to work out their own responses and interpretations rather than to reach predetermined conclusions. (Some academics who use the book in their teaching have asked us if we have model answers to the questions: we do not.) Most of the exercises can be carried out by an individual reader, but they are also appropriate for collaborative discussion in a classroom or 'workshop' session. Some ask the reader to work with a friend or colleague – reading aloud, rewriting, or reformatting a text – to check out the results. As well as rewriting poems into different forms, some exercises involve readers attempting to write their own poems according to the formal or generic principles being dealt with.

Another feature of this complete coursebook is an expanded and revised 'Glossary' of literary terms that are commonly used in the discussion of poetry. The 'Glossary' should not be regarded merely as an appendix or supplement to the main text but, rather, as an integral part of the book. Many of the technical terms included in the 'Glossary' relate to issues examined at greater length in the chapters, but it also includes terms which we do not discuss elsewhere but which students are likely to encounter when reading critical books and articles about poetry. Each 'Glossary' entry offers at least a definition of the term, often with an illustrative example. In many cases, however, we have written a longer

entry to clarify some of the issues, problems and assumptions which, in our experience, students need to understand in the usage of poetic terms. Often a 'Glossary' entry signals (in **bold**) related terms which can be usefully cross-referenced elsewhere in the 'Glossary': under **register**, for example, there is a cross-reference to **connotation**. Readers can also use the concluding 'Index' to find the places in the main text where some or all these terms are used or discussed more fully. The list of 'Poems and Passages Discussed or Used for Exercises' at the end of the book demonstrates the wide range of poems included in the book and can also be used as a shortcut to our treatment of poems that the reader may be interested in.

Reading Poetry can also claim to be a complete coursebook because it presents readers with the best research and critical debates about every aspect of poetry that they need to understand to be able to read poetry with insight and pleasure. As the British politician John Smith (1938–1994) once insisted, writing, teaching, and studying at university should always be in touch with the best research in the field. If readers wish to follow up any of the ideas and debates presented in the chapters, they can make use of the substantial 'Bibliography' at the end of the book. If they wish to read more poems by any of the hundred or so poets dealt with in this book, a good place to start would be the online Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org/), an extensive archive of poems, biographies of poets, recorded readings, essays, blogs, a glossary of poetic terms, and an archive of *Poetry* magazine.

Reading Poetry begins with what we call a 'Formal Introduction' on the basis that we assume that the formal organisation of poetry into lines is the only consistent marker of poetry and the basis of its difference from other forms of literature. The focus on the close reading of poetic language continues in 'Part II: Textual Strategies', while Part III expands the reader's horizon to include considerations of genre and intertextuality, moves beyond British and American poetry to encompass the 'post-colonial' poetry produced in Britain's former colonies, and ends with still wider considerations of 'world poetry' and 'ecopoetry'. Yet, the discussion of poetry in these ever-expanding vistas continues to attend to nuances of form and language, and we make frequent cross references in these later chapters to issues and examples which have been discussed in earlier ones. Often, the revisiting of earlier examples, once relevant contexts have been established, can be seen to inform, or sometimes transform, our original questions and answers. We therefore think that the book can be most profitably read sequentially from cover to cover.

As noted, this new edition of *Reading Poetry* maintains the emphasis of the first two editions on the distinctive features and effects of various aspects of poetic form – lineation, rhythm and metre, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism and so on. The 'Formal Introduction' of Part I contains four chapters on the dynamic significance of various aspects of poetic form (especially the interplay between lineation and syntax). 'Part II – Textual Strategies' – explores the way various kinds of rhetorical forms work in poetry. The attention to form persists even in the chapters of the final section which examine the interrelationship

between poetry and various kinds of context. But this third edition extends still further our attention to form in recognition of the 'return to form' in poetry and literary criticism in Britain and the U.S.A. in recent decades.[1] Although free verse (or 'open form') was the dominant norm of twentieth-century poetry, especially in America, many new poets are rediscovering and extending the poetic potential of metre, formal devices and formal genres.[2] This development – which has been dubbed 'The New Formalism' – has been both celebrated and attacked in the so-called 'poetry wars' in the U.S.A.[3] Despite these developments, literary research in Britain and America remains predominantly concerned with questions of politics, history and ideology and treats poetry no differently from prose. *Reading Poetry* therefore joins forces with recent attempts, by Derek Attridge and others, to refocus academic attention onto the poetry of poetry and, therefore, onto the dynamic significance of poetic form. This is not an attempt to revert to the formalist criticism of the past, though we can certainly learn from it, but involves developing new ways of understanding poetic form that better account for the dynamic and affective experience of reading great poetry.

The inclusion of a new chapter on 'World Poetry' was stimulated by the increasing prominence – in anthologies, literary criticism and theory, and the internet – of poetry written in the many English-speaking countries around the world together with the translation of poetry into English from an ever-expanding range of cultures and languages. Our new chapter demonstrates that the translation of poetry is a very old practice that has enriched and sometimes launched poetic traditions across the globe. This is especially true of the English poetic tradition. As well as opening up the poetry of the world to English readers, translation has extended English language poetry's formal and generic repertoire and thematic range.[4] The chapter's primary focus is on the way the translation of classical Chinese poetry in the twentieth century had a transformative impact on English language poetry, especially in the U.S.A., enabling the free-verse revolution that did so much to liberate poetry from the supposedly moribund forms and themes of late nineteenth-century pseudo-Romanticism. We also show, however, that the translation of Chinese poetry into English free verse by poet-translators such as Ezra Pound and Gary Snyder overlooked the elaborate formal conventions of the original poems. Form got lost in translation. The expansion of world poetry, then, is intrinsically connected to questions of poetic form and its resistance to translation.

Our final chapter on 'The Poetry of the Earth' responds to even more important developments in poetry and poetry criticism in the early twenty-first century. The recent emergence of 'ecocriticism' in literary studies, in response to the urgent ecological crises and challenges that beset us, is beginning to transform the map of the English poetic tradition, resetting our reading of canonical poets and poems and giving new prominence to hitherto marginalised poets and poetry. Yet, ecocriticism is not merely a new fashion in the academic study of poetry. It necessarily and urgently raises the question of

whether 'ecopoetry' – poetry that celebrates the profound beauty and complexity of ecosystems or that criticises the destruction of such ecosystems – can contribute to our efforts to save the planet. The chapter explores the possibility that the ecocritical reading of ecopoetry from the Romantic period onward might help us to love and value the natural environment and, therefore, take action to help protect it. As we will see, poetry can have such effects not merely through what it says (its content) but through its subtle uses of poetic form. Once again, then, it's a matter of reading poetry *as poetry* rather than as polemic.

In addition to the desire to explore and present these important developments in poetry and criticism (the renewed attention to form, world poetry and ecopoetry), a more fundamental motive for revising *Reading Poetry* for a third edition is that we continue to believe that the teaching and study of poetry in schools, colleges and universities is a vital part of academic literary studies and that our book – updated, rewritten and extended – remains the best one available for the job. But perhaps our primary motive for publishing this third edition is our conviction that the intelligent and informed reading of poetry enriches the lives of individuals and enhances the general culture. Most of the reading for and writing of this new edition took place during the COVID-19 lockdown in Britain in the spring and summer of 2020. Reading poetry – re-reading old favourites and discovering new ones – has been a sustaining joy in difficult times. Thus, although we claim that *Reading Poetry* is a complete coursebook, we also hope that non-academic readers – and even poets – will find it stimulating and helpful. We believe that *Reading Poetry* will enhance all kinds of readers' experience of the profound intellectual and aesthetic pleasures that can be derived from the informed and intelligent reading of poetry. Such reading experience is not incompatible with academic study, but it can lead to a life-long love of poetry that may have even more important benefits than a good university degree.

One of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis in the U.K. (combined with Brexit) is that raw materials – such as timber – have become hard to get hold of and have risen sharply in price. The same can be said for the raw materials of this book. In some cases, it took many months for publishers and copyright holders to respond to our requests for permission to use poems. And permission fees have soared in comparison with those for the first two editions. This hike in permission fees seems particularly inappropriate for a book designed to enhance students' knowledge and enjoyment of poetry. With some reluctance, we have had to jettison poems by poets whose publishers asked for particularly exorbitant fees. Poets who have regrettably disappeared from this new edition include e.e. cummings, Langston Hughes and Carol Ann Duffy. Poets deserve to be properly paid for the use of their poetry, of course, but the first two of these poets are long dead (in 1962 and 1967, respectively). Perhaps the poetry of these poets is sufficiently well-known not to need the boost that *Reading Poetry* could give to it, but it would have been good to have woven our analysis of their poems into our overall argument and to have introduced their poetry

to new generations of readers. Suffice it to say, however, that the poems that have replaced the lost poems are equally interesting and serve our purposes equally well.

Notes

1 See Timothy Steele, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* (University of Arkansas Press, 1990); Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown, eds, *Reading for Form* (University of Washington Press and Walter Chapin Simpson Humanities Centre, 2006); Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford University Press, 2007); and Robert Hass, *A Little Book on Form: An Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry* (Ecco, 2017). Derek Attridge has continued to investigate poetic rhythm and metre and poetic form more generally in books such as *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and (with Henry Staten) *The Craft of Poetry: Dialogues on Minimal Interpretation* (Routledge, 2015).

2 'New Formalist' anthologies of poetry include Robert Richman, *The Direction of Poetry: An Anthology of Rhymed and Metred Verse Written in the English Language Since 1975* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990); Mark Jarman and David Mason, eds, *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism* (Story Line Press, 1996); Annie Finch, ed., *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women* (Story Line Press, 1997); and Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes, eds, *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art* (University of Michigan Press, 2002). Many of the new poets and poems added to the sixth edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2018) could be described as 'formalist'.

3 The publication of Dana Gioia's celebratory 'Notes on the New Formalism' in *The Hudson Review* 40:3 (Autumn 1987) 395-408 provoked hostile responses by the proponents of free verse, as did its republication in the first edition of Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* in 1992. See Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Graywolf Press, 2002), pp. xii, 29–41. Subsequent academic discussions of 'New Formalism' include Annie Finch, *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative and Tradition* (Story Line Press, 1999); Robert McPhillips, *The New Formalism: A Critical Introduction* (WordTech Communications, 2005); Vereina Theile and Linda Tredennick, eds, *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 17–30.

4 Dana Gioia, 'Notes on the New Formalism', in *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Graywolf Press, 1992, 2002), pp. 29-41 (35).

Part I

Formal Introduction

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1 What Is Poetry?

How Do We Read It?

Received Ideas and Common Assumptions

One of the concerns of this book will be repeatedly to ask questions about what poetry is and to question those things about poetry which we take for granted – including the category of poetry itself. This might seem a rather peculiar line of enquiry because we tend to assume that we know what poetry is.[1] Our claim, however, is that reading poetry involves often unrecognised or unexamined assumptions about the nature of poetry. We want to show that it is important to become aware of these assumptions and to place them alongside other, quite different, assumptions because this will enhance or even transform our reading of poetry.

Attempts to answer the question 'What is poetry?' usually end up trying to define it against what it is not. There are perhaps three interrelated ways of doing this. Poetry can be defined as a *genre* by saying that it is different from the other main literary genres of narrative prose fiction and drama. A second definition – based on features of *language* – distinguishes between the way poetry uses language and so-called 'ordinary' uses of language. A third definition – this time on *formal* lines – would differentiate poetry from prose on the basis that it is arranged differently on the page.[2] We will examine each of these claims throughout the course of this book. What this examination will reveal is a set of common assumptions about poetry which are probably shared by a large proportion of readers in Britain and North America in the early twenty-first century (and perhaps in many other parts of the English-speaking world and beyond).

One of the arguments of this book will be to suggest that poetry is not one thing but many things. This is not only because we have different ways of describing poetry or because there is a huge variety of language practices which are included under the umbrella term 'poetry', but also because what are assumed to be the defining characteristics of poetry change through history. These changing assumptions not only affect the practice of poets but also influence the kinds of poetry which are valued and the ways of reading which readers tend to adopt. The result of all this is that the category we call poetry is unstable and, possibly, that there may be no essential thing called 'poetry' at all.

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Yet, it would seem possible to challenge this line of argument by the commonsensical assertion that we know a poem when we see one. Even readers who have not read very much poetry seem to share certain conceptions about what poetry is and about what constitutes ‘good’ poetry. It will, therefore, be useful, at this point, to examine a poem to which, experience tells us, most people usually respond to as ‘good’ or ‘proper’ poetry. In doing this, we will try to identify those features which make it seem ‘poetic’ to such readers. For reasons which we will examine later, Keats seems to embody our collective idea of the quintessential poet, and his ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (1819) is often thought of as an exemplary poem. It is for these reasons that we will make this poem a test case in our attempt to make explicit our culture’s implicit assumptions about what poetry is.

Ode to a Nightingale

1

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
  My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
  One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, 5
  But being too happy in thine happiness –
    That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,
      In some melodious plot
  Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
    Singest of summer in full-throated ease. 10

2

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
  Cooled a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
  Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South, 15
  Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
   With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
     And purple-stainèd mouth,
 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
   And with thee fade away into the forest dim: 20

3

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
  What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, 25
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow. 30

4

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.
Already with thee! tender is the night, 35
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Clustered around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. 40

5

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit tree wild; 45
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast-fading violets covered up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. 50

6

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die, 55
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
To thy high requiem become a sod. 60

7

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
  No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
  In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path 65
  Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
    She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
      The same that oft-times hath
  Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
    Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. 70

8

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
  To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
  As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades 75
  Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
    Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
      In the next valley-glades:
  Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
    Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep? 80

What we would like to do, here, is draw attention to various features of the poem which contribute to the feeling that this is 'authentic poetry'. This will entail examining how the poem uses certain poetic conventions which are, themselves, based on particular assumptions about what poetry is. It will also involve asking whether these assumptions and conventions require us to read poetry in ways which accord with them – that is, do particular kinds of poetry encourage or demand particular ways of reading? Our answers to both questions are deeply bound up with each other: our assumptions about what poetry is will shape our way of reading poetry, and our way of reading poetry will tend to influence which poems we regard as exemplary poetry. In other words, we want to suggest that poetry is as much a product of ways of reading as of ways of writing.

Poetry as Expression (Poet or Speaker?)

Some of the most deep-rooted preconceptions about poetry in our culture are that it records profound personal emotion and experience, that it is often about nature and that it should be 'imaginative'. Keats's 'Ode' seems, indeed, to confirm these preconceptions. The very event itself – a poet listening in solitude

to a nightingale, surrounded by woods and flowers – seems especially poetic. And this poet's imaginative response to the bird is presented as a powerful and deeply significant experience, which we are invited to share. One of the questions that we will be asking is the extent to which the 'poetic' quality of this event is derived from the profundity of the experience itself, from the specific ways in which the poem articulates the experience, or from the fact that Keats has chosen a topic which certain cultural assumptions have attuned us to regard as already intrinsically poetic. As we shall see in Chapter 11, nightingales – as opposed to, say, starlings – are birds which come already invested with 'poetic value' from their frequent appearance in poetry.

Perhaps one of the reasons this pessimistic but deeply moving poem is so popular is the assumption that it gives us direct access to the profound inner experience of the poet himself. Many readers have sought to 'explain' the poem by referring to Keats's biography – especially to the fact that he had recently nursed his brother as he died of tuberculosis. The poem becomes additionally poignant when we remember that Keats himself died of the same disease only two years later at the age of twenty-five.[3] For these reasons, Keats's life and poetry have been fused in the imaginations of readers perhaps more than is the case with any other poet. This is a particularly telling instance of our claim that the assumptions we bring to a poem subtly shape our reading of it. For reasons that will emerge in the course of this book, we want to discourage you from reading poems for biographical meaning – which is why we ascribe the voice in this poem to a 'poetic speaker' rather than to Keats. However interesting Keats was as a human being, we want to encourage you to concentrate on reading his poetry rather than trying to re-create his thoughts and feelings. As T.S. Eliot puts it: 'Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry.'[4]

'Ode to a Nightingale' invites us to read it as an intense and sincere expression of experience – as the opening words of the poem ('My heart aches') attest. This is reinforced by the speaker's claim that his 'pain' arises not through 'envy' of the nightingale's 'happy lot' but through a profound empathy which he feels with the nightingale. In fact, the whole poem is driven by the speaker's attempt to merge his consciousness with the nightingale. In the second stanza (poems are divided into 'stanzas' not 'verses'), he longs for a glass of special wine on the assumption that it will somehow enable him to escape the world and join the nightingale. We learn in the third stanza why the speaker wants to 'dissolve' and to merge his consciousness with the bird. The real world, he claims, is a place 'where men sit and hear each other groan' (24). In the fourth stanza, he abandons the idea of wine (represented figuratively by Bacchus, the god of wine) in favour of poetry as a means of escaping this world and flying to the nightingale on 'the viewless wings of Poesy'. For one brief moment, the speaker, apparently, feels that poetry has indeed transported him from the human world to the realm of the nightingale: 'Already with thee! tender is the night' (35). The speaker feels that this intense moment of poetic communication is a perfect moment to die and leave the world and its woes forever: 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die'. Yet, the last stanza brings the speaker

back to earth when he realises that his union with the nightingale was simply an illusion; the bird's song fades away into the next valley, and he is left alone, bewildered and 'forlorn'.

What we have achieved so far is a paraphrase of the poem's 'plot', and this has helped us begin to clarify what the poem is 'about'. This is quite an effective way of beginning to analyse any poem because it provides a provisional framework upon which we can build a more precise analysis of the poem's local details. What we have also achieved is confirmation of the fact that this poem does indeed conform with our expectation that poetry records intense personal experience – though we are suggesting that it is the experience of an invented speaker rather than that of the poet himself.

Poetry as a Response in the Reader?

The assumption that poetry is the expression of intense personal experience usually involves a related assumption about what we are supposed to do when we read such a poem. Victorian readers assumed that the proper response to such poetry was to be moved by it, and high-school students studying literature in the early twenty-first century are encouraged to believe that the most important factor in reading a poem is to have some kind of personal response to it. This emphasis on personal and emotional response at high-school level can be seen in the following exam question:

> Choose a poem which makes you feel happy or sad or angry. Say what the poem is about and why it makes you feel happy or sad or angry. What particular words or phrases in the poem make you feel that way?

Another question asks students to compare two poems in terms of 'the impact the poets' writing makes on you'. But to ask such questions is to invite students to report responses that may have less to do with the poems themselves and more to do with the student's own emotional life ('when I read this poem, I think of my grandmother …'). What kind of personal response might be appropriate to 'Ode to a Nightingale'? What kind of response would reveal something about the poem rather than our own sensibility? Are we expected to experience a sympathetic response to the poet's (or the speaker's) intense feelings? In reading the first stanza, should we, too, try to experience happiness so intense that it is almost painful? Should we try to empathise with the nightingale in the way that the poetic speaker does? And are we expected to share the speaker's sense of loss in the last stanza when the vision has dissolved? Framing these questions in this way allows us to suggest that, although we want to encourage students to enjoy the imaginative pleasure of reading poetry, such responses, in themselves, can be quite vacuous. More profound aesthetic pleasures, we want to argue, emerge from a more careful and sustained analysis that involves the intellect as well as the emotions and that tells us something about how the poem's language might produce emotional and aesthetic effects in readers.

Poetry and the World: A Representation of Life?

Another way of approaching the poem would be to ask how accurately it represents the real world. Such an approach does not seem to get us very far with this poem because it is not really a description of an action or an object at all. It is not really 'about' a nightingale, but about the *idea* of a nightingale and what it means for the speaker. This is shown by the way the speaker seems to believe that this bird is 'immortal' (61) and by the way he addresses it as if it could understand and respond to what he says. This latter feature is an example of a poetic convention called 'apostrophe' – which can be defined as 'a figure of speech in which the speaker addresses an abstract or an absent thing as though it were living and present'. Yet, even this extremely poetic convention does not entirely remove the poem from recognisable experience: we talk to pets and toy animals in this way, and even though not many of us yearn to pair up with a nightingale, most of us may have occasionally felt that the world is a miserable place, and we may have tried to escape from it in some way or other. Thus, the driving force of the poem – the recognition of sorrow and despair and the desire to escape them – seems to be in touch with more general human experience, as is the insight that our various means of escape bring only temporary relief.

Reading for the Message?

We could say, then, that the poem gives us a special insight into 'the human condition'. Such a response alerts us to another way of reading, which has been current in the history of literature and is still in circulation – that is, to assume that literature can offer us deep insights about life. Such an assumption encourages us to read literature for its 'moral message'. Keats's 'Ode' seems to be saying that the ecstasies offered us by nature, wine, poetry, love and beauty are transient illusions which provide only temporary respite from the permanence of human suffering (see lines 29–30). Yet, reading this poem (or perhaps any poem) to discover its 'message' seems to lead to banal conclusions that could be put more straightforwardly or more powerfully. Thus, although students are often encouraged to read poems for their 'message', we want to stress that this is an unproductive and misleading approach to poetry. To paraphrase what the Scottish poet Norman MacCaig once said in a TV interview, 'If you want messages, go to the supermarket'. (In the west of Scotland, 'messages' is a word for groceries.)

Romantic Poetry

Many of the assumptions we have examined and questioned in the previous sections – that poetry records or represents the profound imaginative experience and moral insight of a creative genius – derive from ideas developed by Romantic writers in the period in which Keats lived. One of the characteristic

assumptions of Romantic theory is Wordsworth's assertion in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of [the] powerful feelings' of a specially gifted individual – someone who 'being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply'.[5] Romantic theory thus tends to stress that poetry is the direct product of the special imaginative capacity of the individual genius. The quality of a poem is a measure of the poet's sensibility, and the quality of a reader's response is in turn a measure of his or her sensibility.

Yet, the fact that most readers tend to share these Romantic assumptions does not mean that this is the only way to read poetry in general, or even Romantic poetry in particular. This is only one of various possible ways of reading poetry; we do not have to read Romantic poetry on its own terms – that is, as if we were Romantics. The fact that so many people hold Romantic assumptions about art does not mean that they are true or always insightful; it indicates, instead, how such assumptions continue to be reproduced in education and the media. In the twentieth century, literary theorists and critics of various persuasions resisted and criticised such Romantic readings and ways of 'explaining' poetry. One of the projects of this book, in fact, is to put you in touch with some of these more recent assumptions about poetry because they usually yield more insights into poetic texts than those produced by 'Romantic' ways of reading.

Close Reading and the Language of Poetry

Romantic readings of literary texts tend to focus on questions about sincerity of feeling, emotional response and profundity of insight. More recent ways of reading poetry, however, beginning with New Criticism in the middle decades of the twentieth century, place more emphasis on the close reading of the actual language of the poetic text itself.[6] One of the things we will be stressing in this book is that a particularly rewarding and challenging way of reading poetry is the careful analysis of the interplay between the language and form of individual poems. In fact, we will attempt to show that it is only through this process that the emotional power, mimetic possibilities and moral implications of a poetic text can be produced and experienced. The stress on 'close reading' will inevitably raise the question of whether the language of poetry differs from other discourses and uses of language. Although many readers say that a poem ought to be enjoyed for its own sake, the critical reading of poetry involves trying to understand how that pleasure is produced. What will emerge in this chapter is that poetry – or at least this particular poem – achieves its emotional power by working the resources of the language to the limit.

'Ode to a Nightingale' is particularly interesting in terms of the way it uses language to produce specific effects. One way in which its language announces itself as 'poetic' is through the employment of what is called 'poetic diction' – words and phrases which we conventionally associate with poetry. The use of archaic second-person pronouns such as 'thou' and 'thy',

of phrases such as 'verdurous glooms' and allusions to classical mythology all conform to our received notions of poetic language. Poetic diction of this kind is sometimes called 'flowery', but this is not a very accurate or revealing term. Poets, critics and linguists have come up with a number of more suggestive ways of describing 'poetic' language, each of which involves differentiating between poetic and what is usually called 'non-poetic' or 'ordinary' language (we will see that such distinctions are not as stable as we might think). One way of describing the way Keats is using language is to call it a 'heightened' language. The nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, suggested that poetic language should 'be the current language heightened, to any degree heightened and unlike itself' (Letter to Robert Bridges, 14 August 1879). Another way of describing poetic language is in terms of 'literariness' – that is, the sum of those qualities of the language which make it literary rather than non-literary. The most helpful descriptive term of all is 'register', a term used by linguists to refer to the fact that language varies according to the context in which it is used.[7] The language appropriate to a scientific report is different from the language used in soap operas or in a letter to a friend, and each discourse, activity or context has its own appropriate register. The peculiar conventions of poetic language, therefore, mark it as the register appropriate to poetry. As we will see, this register changes through history (which is why some poems use a register which seems more archaic to us than others).

Another striking feature of Keats's language in this poem is the sustained use of sound-patterning, such as rhyme or alliteration. 'Ode to a Nightingale' can be said to be a melodious poem about a melodious bird because it plays upon the pleasure we often get from the sounds of language. In an unexpected way, however, the poem's denouement suggests that it is the sound of words which destroys the illusion which it had earlier created. In the very moment when the speaker claims that the song of the nightingale has had a magic charm throughout history, the chime of his own words breaks the spell:

> The voice I hear this passing night was heard
> In ancient days by emperor and clown:
> Perhaps the **s**elf-**s**ame **s**ong that found a path
> Through the **s**ad **h**eart of Ruth, when, **s**ick for **h**ome,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
> The **s**ame that oft-times **h**ath
> Charm'd magic casements, opening on the **f**oam
> Of perilous seas, in **f**aery **l**ands **f**or**l**orn.
>
> **F**or**l**orn! the very word is like a **bell**
> To **toll** me back from thee to my **sole** self!
> Adieu! the **f**ancy cannot cheat so **well**
> As she is **f**am'd to do, deceiving elf. (63–74)

The concentrated use of alliteration in the penultimate stanza (culminating in '**f**aery **l**ands **f**or**l**orn') could be said to present an equivalent to the charm of the nightingale's song. Yet, this technique suddenly reverses its effect when the repetition of the word 'forlorn' brings the poetic speaker back down to earth. This occurs as much through the sound of the word as through its meaning. We are told that the word 'forlorn' echoes 'like a bell' to 'toll' the speaker back to his 'sole self'. (In doing so, it changes its meaning: applied to the 'faery lands' it means lost or disappeared, but when the speaker applies it to himself, it means forsaken or wretched.) Such chiming effects resonate throughout the first four lines of the last stanza, through end-rhyme, internal rhyme and assonance ('bell', 'toll', 'sole self', 'well', 'elf'). In an interesting way, these conventional poetic devices work, here, to undo the poetic effects of the earlier part of the poem. The poem seems to get tangled up in the material nature of language itself and can no longer produce transcendental illusions.

As well as emphasising or foregrounding the sounds of words, the poem seems to explore the possibilities and pleasures of figurative language. In the second stanza, for example, the speaker is asking for a glass of wine, but this is never explicitly mentioned. Instead, the poem presents us with figurative terms for wine, calling it 'a draught of *vintage*' (11) and 'a beaker full of *the warm South*' (15). These figures are effective in that they endow the wine with certain associations and connotations. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us that 'vintage' means enriched through time, rare, mature, valuable, 'usually connoting [a wine] of good or outstanding quality'. The poem also endows the wine with the positive associations we have of nature: 'tasting of Flora and the country green' (13), this wine is the essence of flowers and the countryside ('Flora' here refers not to a modern brand of margarine but to the Roman goddess of springtime and flowers). Its association in the poem with dance, song and mirth also makes this wine celebratory. The second metaphor – wine as 'the warm South' – does not simply tell us that this wine comes from southern countries, but picks up on particular associations of southern Europe, which are then developed in 'Provençal song' and 'sunburnt mirth' (14). In this way, Keats's figurative descriptions of the wine draw on some of the connotations of southern Europe that were prevalent in Britain in his time and are still used in holiday and wine advertisements on television. Keats's highly 'poetic' language turns out to employ techniques and devices which are now most often seen in advertising. This is appropriate because, in a sense, the speaker is trying to sell himself (and/or the reader) the idea that wine might offer a way out of the everyday suffering which is so vividly presented in the following stanza's account of 'leaden-eyed despairs' (28).

This brief example of 'close reading' (which could be extended throughout the poem) suggests that reading poetry involves a special way of attending to its language (a reading in slow motion) which appears different from the way we read 'everyday' language (though this way of reading also turns out to be appropriate for analysing other media – such as advertisements – which attempt to affect us in powerful and subtle ways). Close reading pays careful attention

to the language of poetry and to how it works – how the poem achieves its effects through employing poetic conventions and techniques which exploit specific cultural connotations. We move away from the rather vague personal impressions which result from Romantic assumptions about poetry and arrive at a way of reading which talks about how the actual language of the poem generates effects and meanings. This attention to the conventions of poetic language is one of the ways of discussing poetry which will be encouraged throughout this book.

Yet, the fact that such techniques of 'close reading' are useful in analysing other kinds of language as well as poetry indicates that the features they respond to cannot be defining features of poetry. All discourses employ figurative language (in varying degrees and for different purposes), and the sound effects of alliteration, rhyme and so on can occur in any kind of language use (and they are not invariably present in poetry). This fact has led critics and theorists to attempt to distinguish poetic uses of such figurative and aural devices from their use in other kinds of discourse (sermons, political speeches and slogans, advertisements, catch phrases, jokes, novels, plays, songs). Some writers have suggested that these features are used for different purposes in poetry from those they have in other discourses (for aesthetic pleasure rather than, say, political persuasion). Others have said that, whereas such features are a kind of spurious decoration in most instances, in poetry they reveal a 'verbal art' whose carefully designed 'form' is as important as its 'content'. But all such arguments are problematic attempts to distinguish poetry from prose and other non-poetic discourses on the basis of features which are actually common to both.

The Lineation of Poetry

In fact, the only watertight distinction between poetry and most non-poetic discourses, we suggest, is that poetry is set out on the page in lines whose length is decided by the author, whereas lines of prose run from margin to margin and are governed by arbitrary factors such as page width and font size. (In other words, whereas the division of poetry into lines may be significant, the division of prose into lines is a meaningless feature: the meaningful divisions of prose are sentences and paragraphs, not lines.) Lines of poetry, then, are measured not by a ruler or by the width of the page but according to the poet's own design. We will see in later chapters that this is not a trivial fact but a distinguishing feature which has numerous consequences.

The lines of 'Ode to a Nightingale' are organised into equal groups ('stanzas') and are of equal length (with one exception per stanza). The line length is measured by the number of syllables: to keep it simple, for the moment, each of Keats's lines has ten syllables (except for the eighth line of each stanza, which has only six). The fact that the length of each line fits into a regular template (the number of stressed and unstressed syllables per line is kept constant) means that Keats's poem is an example of metrical verse ('metre' is etymologically

related to 'measure'). The consequences of employing such a metrical form are manifold; here, we simply want to stress a couple of points. The poem's metrical regularity sets up a visual and aural framework or pattern within which all the other linguistic effects we have talked about take place. An instance of this is that rhyme words do not appear randomly but usually at the end of lines (they are end-rhymes). The rhyme words thus contribute to the poem's overall pattern, reinforcing the metrical structure. At the same time, when Keats employs extra rhymes which are internal to the line (the 'internal rhymes' of 'toll' and 'sole', for instance) it draws extra attention to these important words and the relation between them. Every other sound effect and figurative device slots into and reinforces this pattern, and this becomes part of our experience of reading the poem. Indeed, it is a powerful means by which this poem becomes 'poetic'. Thus, we would claim that it is the division into lines which is the basis of poetry and the origin of the poetic effect (rhyme, by contrast, is not a necessary feature of poetry).

Yet, the highly regular pattern of lines in the 'Ode' does not produce a sense that the poem is rigidly structured. In fact, our own feeling about the poem is that it seems free-flowing and 'spontaneous'. We want to suggest that this effect is, paradoxically, a product of technique rather than chance or spontaneity. It is largely produced by the fact that, although Keats has set up a strict metrical template of equal line lengths, the structure of his sentences hardly ever coincides with the line structure. Thus, for example, the sentence beginning 'thy plaintive anthem' starts somewhere in the middle of the line and then spills over the ends of three lines before pausing at 'valley-glades' and finally ending at the end of a line with 'waking dream':

> Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
> Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
> Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
> In the next valley-glades:
> Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
> Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep? (75–80)

In dynamic contrast to the extended sentence that overruns several line endings, the last line is divided into two equal, self-contained phrases which fit neatly within the line structure. It is this unpredictable interplay between regular line and stanza form and the irregular sentence structure which gives the language a sense of spontaneous energy. (You could test this by converting the poem into prose and seeing if the movement of the sentences produces the same effects.)

Poetry and Meaning

Although such close attention to the local effects of linguistic detail is fascinating in itself, it becomes more interesting when we can relate it to larger

questions – such as 'What does the poem mean?'. We have already offered one kind of answer to this in suggesting that the poem can be read as a comment upon 'the human condition'. Yet, recent theories of literature have taught us to be suspicious about such claims by stressing that all meaning is historically and culturally specific rather than universal. In our close reading of the 'Ode', we had to specify what 'the warm South' might mean in a poem written in Britain in the early nineteenth century. The Mediterranean countries of southern Europe have a significance in Britain which is historically and culturally specific to Britain (and to northern Europe in general). For an Australian or South American reader, by contrast, the 'south' may have very different connotations. In addition, the very question 'what does the poem mean?' – although it is often encountered in schools and universities – can be disastrously misleading because it can lure even experienced readers into trying to translate a subtle and complex poem like 'Ode to a Nightingale' into a 'meaning' that will often seem reductive or banal in comparison with the poem itself. Nonetheless, the question of meaning (or meanings) cannot be put to one side. But rather than reading a poem as if it were a message with a single meaning that needs to be decoded, we suggest that you approach poetry in terms of the way it explores questions or issues in meaningful ways (in this book, we sometimes suggest that a poem has an 'argument'). In our experience, the most interesting poems remain meaningful no matter how many times we read them, and new meanings emerge as we re-read them across the years. Thus, we can never assume that we have 'got' a poem's meaning once and for all and no longer need to return to it.

Some theories of literature have also suggested that different ways of reading, informed by different assumptions about what poetry is and about the purpose of reading poetry, may produce different versions of the 'same' poem (just as different directors will produce very different interpretations of the 'same' play) and, therefore, perhaps, different meanings. Yet, all such readings or 'productions' have to prove themselves by close reference to the language of the poem itself. The idea that different readings or meanings may be equally valid does not mean that 'anything goes', nor does it mean that an interpretation cannot be wrong.

The complex language of Keats's 'Ode' yields different readings according to the assumptions we bring to it and the questions we ask of it. Our present concern in this chapter is to ask 'What is poetry?' This means that our approach to Keats's poem is not a disinterested one – we have a question in mind before we read it. Approaching Keats's poem with this question in mind produces a revealing result in that it allows us to suggest that the 'Ode' can be read as a poem about poetry itself. This can be seen in the way many of the images it uses, though they refer to various other things, turn out to have associations with poetry. Thus, the speaker chooses wine as his first avenue of escape from the tribulations of mortal suffering, but its power derives from the way it is said to taste of 'Provençal song' (14) – which links it with the late-medieval troubadours, who were poet-musicians of Provence in the eleventh to thirteenth

centuries. Much the same connection between wine and poetry is made when wine is described as 'the true, the blushful Hippocrene' (16); this suggests that this wine will induce poetic inspiration because the Hippocrene was a fountain of the Muses who were thought to inspire classical poets in Ancient Greece.[8] However, having initially identified wine and the heightening of the senses (or intoxication) it provides with the effect of poetry in these images, the speaker goes on to affirm the superiority of poetry itself as a means of transcending his condition:

> Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
>   Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
> But on the viewless wings of Poesy … (31–33)

It is poetry itself, then, which seems to offer the speaker the best chance of soaring up to the heightened world of the nightingale. By employing the 'wings of Poesy', the speaker will not only achieve poetic 'flight' – or a flight of the imagination – but will, thereby, become *like* the nightingale.

In this way, the poem emerges as a celebration or exploration of the power of poetry itself to help us escape a world of suffering. But the poetry being tested here is not poetry in general but a specifically Romantic kind of poetry. A key term for Romantic poetry is 'imagination' – though it is important to realise that this term has a history of changing uses and that even the Romantic poets had different theories about what it is and how it works.[9] For Keats, the imagination was primarily a means of achieving a sympathetic oneness between the self and other things – between an observing human being and the person, creature or object being observed. In one of his letters, Keats claimed: 'if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel'.[10] This is a specific instance of Keats's repeated suggestion in his letters that the poetic imagination is exhibited by the poet's capacity to dissolve his own identity in an act of empathy with something outside the self. The 'poetical Character', he writes, 'has no self – it is everything and nothing – It has no character. …A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity.' Instead, the poet is continually informing 'and filling some other Body'.[11] Keats's account of the poetic imagination and the character of the poet lends further support to our claim that 'Ode to a Nightingale' is a poem about poetry because, as we have seen, its speaker strives to escape from suffering by losing his own identity and becoming one with the nightingale through an act of sympathetic identification. And it is the poetic imagination – the 'wings of Poesy' – which holds out the greatest promise for such a merging of speaker and bird.[12]

Yet, just as wine is rejected in favour of poetry, so poetry itself is found wanting at the end of the poem by failing to fulfil its promise:

> Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
>   To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

> Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
> As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. (71–74)

The poem ends, therefore, by recognising the limitations of the imagination: the 'fancy' has failed and leaves the speaker alone with his 'sole self' (for Keats, the terms 'fancy' and 'imagination' were interchangeable).[13] However wonderful the sense of flight which the fancy or imagination can produce, it is revealed at the end as a kind of cheat whose limitation is either that it is not true or lasting or that it does not cheat effectively enough. The speaker's attempt to use the poetic imagination as a means of overcoming the difference between self and other fails, and the nightingale's 'plaintive anthem' vanishes into 'the next valley-glades'. It is, therefore, possible to suggest that this quintessential Romantic poem also investigates and criticises Romantic conceptions of poetry in so far as they claim that the poetic imagination can transcend 'the human condition' or overcome the difference between self and other or self and nature. The 'Ode to a Nightingale', then, needs to be read not as a beautiful, escapist poem but as a poem which takes a hard, critical look at 'Romantic' assumptions about poetry – including Keats's own. (This reading depends entirely on the last stanza, and it would therefore be an interesting experiment to read the poem without it. Try it now and try to articulate your sense of the difference between the complete and the shortened versions of the poem.)

The Poet's Intention?

We have acknowledged that our reading of Keats's poem depends, to some extent, on the assumptions we brought to it and the questions we asked of it. Our argument that it is a poem about poetry arose in the context of a discussion in which we were asking the question: 'What is poetry?' Critics often appear to be saying that poems 'really' mean something different from what they appear to mean, and students of literature are often led to assume that the interpretation of a text is a matter of finding its 'hidden message'. In this instance, Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', we seem to have suggested, is not 'really' about a nightingale but about poetry.

A potential response to our interpretation would be to ask whether we are claiming that we now understand what Keats was 'really' trying to say in this poem. This raises the problem of the author's intention. It seems quite natural to assume that the purpose of reading poetry is to discover the poet's intention in writing it, and thus it may be surprising to learn that a great deal of controversy has arisen over this assumption. Eliot's insistence that criticism should be directed upon the poem rather than the poet led the so-called New Critics to claim that a poem should be read on its own terms rather than in terms of its author's statements about his or her intentions when writing it. A poet's intentions, they argued, are of interest only if they are fully realised in the poem itself. There would, then, be no point in going to the author to seek confirmation of a particular interpretation.

It is possible to identify at least four interrelated problems with the notion of authorial intention. First, there is the problem of access. In many cases, as with Keats, the poet may be dead and may have left no record of his or her intentions concerning a particular poem; in such a case, to claim to know what the poet's intentions were would be tantamount to claiming to be able to read the minds of the dead – which is an art that we do not profess. Second, even when we have access to statements of intention which are independent of the poem, we should not necessarily be constrained by them because, after all, poets sometimes deliberately mislead readers or forget what their original intentions were; their intentions may have changed in the course of writing or in subsequent revisions, and a writer may have great difficulty summing up what he or she was trying to do at any particular stage of writing. Third, people often say things which have meanings they did not consciously intend and were not aware of, and, particularly in poetry, those unintended meanings are often as interesting as intended meanings – it is difficult to assume, in the wake of Freud, that all human intentions can be consistent and unitary. Fourth, in the light of these considerations, we need to ask why the author's intentions should be privileged over what the text itself seems to say or what careful readers discover it to be saying.

We can apply some of these questions to our interpretation of Keats's 'Ode'. It will, we hope, be clear from our discussion that we were anxious to justify our reading by close reference to the poem itself, which is why we constantly quoted the evidence from the text which supported our interpretation. Clearly, we cannot ask Keats whether he knew that he was 'really' writing a poem about poetry but, even if we could, it is worth asking whether it would make any difference. Would it invalidate our interpretation if Keats (in a surviving letter, for instance) had described his intentions in quite different terms from our own claims about the poem? If Keats's conscious intentions were different from our interpretation of the poem's meaning, but, nevertheless, compatible with it, what would you conclude from this? And if Keats's declared intentions were wholly at odds with our interpretation, what would you conclude from that? Is an author always the best reader of his or her own writing? Even if the answer is no, does that mean that an author's intentions have *no* interest for us as readers? If we can find evidence of a writer's beliefs and preoccupations from his or her other actions and writings – as we did earlier when we documented Keats's ideas about the imagination and the 'poetical Character' from his letters – is not such evidence valuable when it supports our reading? If so, why should we ignore it when it contradicts our interpretation? Does such 'external' evidence have the same value, however, as evidence drawn from the text of the poem itself?

The fact that we have not given categorical answers to these questions may suggest why the issue of authorial intention should have proved so problematic and controversial for modern criticism.[14] However, we would insist that our particular interpretation of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' does not need to support itself by claiming that what we have uncovered is Keats's intention in

writing the poem. That is not what we are claiming for our reading. We do, nevertheless, believe that our reading has identified an important and interesting meaning of the poem and not something we have arbitrarily invented or imagined. It is for these reasons that the ways of reading poems presented in this book will rarely worry about or make claims for the author's intentions. This is not to say that an author's intentions are irrelevant or uninteresting but that we can never be certain what those intentions were and that, in any case, such intentions are not the final arbiter of a poem's meaning. In fact, in this book, we are less concerned with *what* poems mean than with *how* they mean. As a consequence, our focus is on reading poetic texts themselves not on reading the minds of poets.

And Now for Something Completely Different

We have claimed that Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' represents most readers' idea about what poetry is. To test this claim, we would like to compare Keats's poem with the poem below, published in 1974 by Charles Simic:

The Garden of Earthly Delights

Buck has a headache. Tony ate
a real hot pepper. Sylvia weighs
herself naked on the bathroom
scale. Gary owes $800 to the
Internal Revenue. Roger says 5
poetry is the manufacture of lightning rods.
José wants to punch his wife
in the mouth. Ted's afraid
of his own shadow. Ray talks
to his tomato plants. Paul 10
wants a job in the post office
selling stamps. Mary keeps
smiling at herself in the mirror.
And I,
I piss in the sink 15
with a feeling of
eternity.

Although some students in university seminars say they prefer Simic's poem to Keats's (some even claim that it is more 'poetic'), there is usually an overwhelming consensus that Keats's poem is both 'better' and more 'poetic' than Simic's. It might be said that this result is inevitable because we have chosen a poem which seems as utterly unlike Keats's as could be imagined. But this is precisely why a comparison between the two poems will allow us to become more aware of those features of Keats's poem which make it sound

and look more like 'real' poetry (or our received idea about what poetry is). Our method, here, will be, once more, to look closely at the poem's language to see how it achieves its effects.

In terms of poetic form, Keats's poem looks and sounds poetic through his use of formal features such as metre and rhyme, whereas Simic's reads more like a list of comments which have no relation to the fact that it is divided into lines (the fact that 'weighs' rhymes with 'says', in some accents, seems entirely coincidental). A second apparent difference between the poems is in terms of their subject matter. Our received ideas about poetry suggest that flowers and birds are inherently more poetic subjects than bathroom scales or tax problems. This difference is related to a difference of diction or register (that is, the choice of words and phrases): compare 'some melodious plot / Of beechen green' with 'Gary owes $800 to the / Internal Revenue'. A further difference between the poems is in the different images we are given of the poetic speakers. Whereas Keats's speaker displays a 'poetic' sensibility (this is one of the main points of the poem), Simic's seems quite the reverse – as revealed in his admission 'I piss in the sink' (15). The impression that Keats's diction is more 'poetic' than Simic's is also produced by the former's use of cultural allusions (references to the myths and literature of earlier periods or cultures) – for example, in calling the nightingale a 'light-winged Dryad of the trees' (a Dryad was 'a tree-nymph' in classical mythology).

This comparison has revealed some of the features of what we usually think of as 'traditional' poetry, but it also indicates that there are radically different kinds of poetry (we will explore this further in later chapters). One of the things which seems clear enough is that Simic is not trying to write a poem like Keats's. This means that we ought to judge each poem in terms of what it achieves rather than what we think it ought to have achieved based on our conceptions of what poetry should be. There are reasons for enjoying Simic's poem, but they are different from the reasons why we might enjoy Keats's.

Rather than employing the kind of 'poetic' language found in Keats, Simic's poem seems more like a list of mundane observations about everyday urban life in the United States in the late twentieth century. The poem therefore raises interesting points in a discussion of what poetry is because it plays upon our expectations about poetry. If we feel a sense of shock at encountering such 'ordinary' language in a poem, that is because we are expecting something else – probably something like Keats. This sense of shock is, perhaps, most acute when we encounter the word 'piss' in a poem. This is not because the word itself is so shocking – it is used quite casually in some contexts – but because it appears in a poem. Again, the effect of this depends upon its discrepancy with our expectations about poetry and can, therefore, alert us to those expectations.

Part of the poem's impact, then, depends on its relationship to other poems. But there is also an internal tension at work in the poem itself. The use of mundane language acts as a setting against which sudden glimpses of more 'poetic' language seem all the more startling. This juxtaposition of vulgar and poetic registers is most stark in the last four lines:

> And I,
> I piss in the sink
> with a feeling of
> eternity.

The effect here depends precisely upon the clash between poetic and profane language – without this, the effect of either would be diluted. Perhaps, too, these lines, set apart as they are from the rest of the poem, make a kind of Romantic claim about the poem's speaker, foregrounding his 'poetic sensibility' in contrast to the other characters. These lines become still more intriguing when we realise that the poem's title alludes to a triptych of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch called *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1510) (see Figure 1.1).

The left wing of the triptych shows Adam and Eve naked in their *Earthly Paradise*, and the right wing shows *Hell*, where the damned are suffering all kinds of exotic torments. It is the central panel, however, which supplies the title under which the whole triptych is generally known: *Garden of Earthly Delights*. This garden is full of naked figures engaged in all kinds of bizarre activities, sexual, procreative and (despite the word 'Earthly' in the title) out-of-this-world. It is hard for the viewer to decide whether this very strange 'Garden' is closer, in its evident 'delights', to the Garden of Eden, or whether, on the contrary, it represents the sinful pleasures that tempt human beings after mankind's Fall from paradise and which anticipate the equally bizarre and otherworldly torments of Hell that await us as depicted on the following panel. Simic's allusion to this painting invites us to look for parallels between poem and painting. Is Simic suggesting that the mundane chaos of modern life is like Bosch's vision of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*? And if so, is it more like his paradise, or more like his hell? And does the very banality and everyday familiarity of the world occupied by Simic's speaker not seem very different from the extraordinary fantasy world portrayed

Figure 1.1 Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1510).

in all three panels of Bosch's painting? And does this allow us to reinterpret the poem's last lines as either a moment of transcendence or a moment of despair in which the speaker feels that, as in hell, his torments will go on for all eternity? Have we, then, unexpectedly arrived at the possibility that Keats's and Simic's poems are radically different versions of the same theme? Is Simic's speaker also seeking a way out of a world in which we 'sit and hear each other groan'?

It might even be that, as in Keats's poem, the vehicle of escape or transcendence in Simic's poem is poetry itself. Within the list of mundane observations which makes up the first part of the poem, there is an unexpected claim about the nature of poetry: 'Roger says / poetry is the manufacture of lightning rods' (5–6). The statement is quite surprising because we are being invited to think of poetry as a manufacturing process. This is startling because it contradicts most of our received ideas about poetry. Keats himself asserted that 'if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all'.[15] Our idea that poetry comes 'naturally' to the poet, and that it should not involve labour or anything artificial or technical, is yet another assumption which we have inherited from Romanticism. Simic's metaphor is intriguing because there may not, at first sight, be any obvious similarity between poetry and the 'manufacture of lightning rods'. One way of interpreting this metaphor is to think about the function of lightning rods: to conduct electrical energy from storms to the earth. The metaphor might, therefore, be claiming that poetry is a kind of medium which conducts energy from the 'heavens' to the earth. It would, then, be a very new metaphor for the very old concept that poetry is a vehicle for some kind of divine inspiration. In this reading, the poem combines two previously incompatible ideas: although the writing of poetry might be a manufacturing activity, the product (a poem) works as a medium which will conduct inspiration, spark the reader's imagination or even set up a channel through which a lightning-like imaginative impulse may pass from author to reader. In other words, there is a concept of imagination at work in this poem which is only partly dissimilar to Romantic ideas.

Our comparison has so far focused on differences between Simic's language and Keats's, but we ought to say at least something about the most obvious difference between the poems, namely the contrast between Keats's complex, regularly rhymed metrical stanzas and Simic's verse form (or lack of it). As we saw earlier, 'Ode to a Nightingale' is made up of 10-line stanzas in iambic pentameters (apart from the 3-beat eighth lines) with a complex rhyme scheme; by contrast, Simic's poem is printed in irregular lines of different lengths, the line-breaks seldom coinciding with punctuation marks or grammatical divisions of the sentences. Does Keats's use of highly formal stanzas contribute to the general impression that 'Ode to a Nightingale' is more 'poetic' than Simic's poem? In the early twentieth century, the rejection or disuse of traditional verse-forms in favour of free verse became a marker of 'Modernism'. If, as we claim throughout this book (and the claim will be more fully argued in the chapter that follows), the only material difference between poetry and

other language uses is that poetry is divided into lines, then the line-breaks in Simic's poem become the markers of its poetic status. The easiest way to test this assertion would be to type it out as prose (word processors make this an easy option) and see whether that makes any difference, either on the screen or when read aloud. After that, you might try reformatting it with line breaks in places of your own choosing, or you might insert line breaks after every full stop or other punctuation mark (which would reveal the text's regular and repetitious grammar). These exercises could be carried out in group or seminar discussion; once you have put the line breaks in places of your own choice, why not ask other students to read the 'new' poem aloud to see how different readers perform the poem. Do Simic's line breaks give it different rhythms and meanings from your reformatted versions? This exercise may alert you to the differences between written poems and their oral performance. Is poetic form fundamentally a way of formatting words on the page? Or is it a way of signalling typographically the way a poem should sound when read out loud? Are poems primarily visual objects or auditory experiences? Is the poem the words on the page or the spoken (or sung) articulation of those written words? Paying attention to line-breaks is fundamental to the process of recognising a poem's form, which is why, as we shall see in the following chapters, it can often be the key to analysis of how poems of many different kinds work as poems. Moreover, reading aloud will often be the best way of testing or understanding what we say about poetic form in passages we cite as examples and evidence in what follows.

Readers' Assumptions and the Reading Experience

Our readings of Keats's and Simic's poems have demonstrated that we do not (perhaps cannot) approach any poem as 'innocent' readers free from preconceptions about poetry. Although Simic's poem is remarkably 'individual' and 'modern', our response to and understanding of it partly depend on our knowledge of poems such as 'Ode to a Nightingale'. The impact of the poem relies precisely upon the disjunction between our preconceptions about poetry and the poem we actually read. What this means is that our original question – 'What is poetry?' – is not an irrelevant question, even though we may not be able to answer it definitively. On the contrary, this is a question which influences our response to everything we take to be poetry because we have many internalised assumptions about what poetry is and what it does which we bring to bear on any poem we read.

Most of the features we have identified as being authentically 'poetic' in Keats's poem are actually characteristic of Romantic poetry rather than poetry in general. This fact reveals the way in which our assumptions are shaped by the history of culture. Although we may believe that our ideas are personal to us, attention to the history of culture (of which the history of poetry is a part) reveals that our assumptions are inherited from the past and from the way our present culture relates to the past. We should be wary

of thinking that the continued existence of Romantic ideas about poetry means that they are more correct or better than other ideas. Periods prior to the Romantic period had very different ideas about poetry, ideas which shaped the ways in which poetry was written, read and valued. This means that one of the tasks that face us if we want to become better readers of poetry is to familiarise ourselves with these different conventions by reading more poetry from different periods.

Yet, gaining some familiarity with the changing historical assumptions about poetry may lead us to question our own place within that history. Why is it, for example, that we continue to have and value Romantic conceptions about poetry more than 150 years after the end of the Romantic period? One answer to this is the fact that Romantic conceptions continued to have force throughout the nineteenth century and still influence popular ideas about literature and writers today. Some of these ideas were given new life in the theory and practice of the so-called New Criticism, which shaped university teaching of literature in the United States and Britain in the middle decades of the twentieth century. A combination of popular ideas about poetry and a watered-down version of New Criticism continues to influence the way literature is taught in schools in Britain and the United States. The same assumptions underlie the way poetry is discussed on television, in book reviews in newspapers and magazines, and in popular films such as *Dead Poets Society* (Touchstone Pictures, 1989). This is one of the reasons why we continue to regard Keats's 'Ode' (written 200 years ago) as an exemplary poem.

The fact that different theories about poetry have been held at different historical moments indicates why it is impossible to give a definitive answer to the question 'What is poetry?' All answers to that question, inevitably, will be historically and theoretically contingent. And the fact that our assumptions about poetry are shaped by our own place in history, and by the unconscious theories about literature which our particular culture holds and disseminates, means that we, ourselves, cannot stand outside history and theory to see what poetry 'really is'.

The idea that we cannot step outside history or theory is a relatively recent one. Its consequence is that many literary critics have become quite self-conscious about their own 'position' as readers in relation to a text. This self-reflexivity has led to a proliferation of literary theories. Since New Criticism lost its dominant place in the study of literature in universities, no single literary theory has taken its place. Most literature departments in universities these days feel it necessary to teach classes on 'literary theory', and guides to literary theory have flooded the market. Such classes and books typically discuss a range of theories, including Russian Formalism, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Feminism, Reader Response and New Historicism.[16] Each of these theoretical approaches to literature brings its own explicitly formulated assumptions and agenda to a literary text and asks its own characteristic questions of it. There are incompatibilities between these

theories, and some critics will adopt one at the expense of the others in order to declare an identifiable 'position'. More interesting interpretative work is done, however, by critics who explore the overlap between theories and are prepared to use whatever critical tools and theoretical assumptions an individual literary text seems to call for. This is why we are not setting out to teach any particular literary theory so that you will be able to 'apply' it to the next poem you come across. Instead, we want to stimulate you to think about poetry in theoretically informed ways which will allow you to be attentive to the theoretical implications of the features of each poem you read.

Exercises

1. Read the following poem (by Ted Hughes, 1957) several times and then answer the questions that follow.

The Thought-Fox

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star: 5
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf; 10
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow 15
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business 20

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed.

(a) Try to describe who (or what) the speaker of this poem is and the situation which the poem presents.
(b) Why does the poem begin with 'I imagine'? How much of what follows is imagined – is it just the 'midnight moment's forest' or everything in the poem?
(c) How does Hughes make the coming and movement of the fox seem vividly immediate in lines 9–21?
(d) Rewrite the whole poem: (i) without stanza divisions; (ii) in continuous prose. What differences are there between each version?
(e) In the chapter, we discussed the effect in 'Ode to a Nightingale' of the dynamic and irregular interplay between line endings and sentence structure. Does Hughes use similar techniques to achieve appropriate effects in this poem? Begin by marking where each sentence in the poem begins and ends and note what relationship there is between these sentences and the line and stanza structure. How does the relation between verse form and sentence structure work in the long second sentence which presents the movement of the fox?
(f) How do you interpret the fact that the fox 'enters the dark hole of the head' (22)? What is the dark hole of the head? Is there any relation between this dark hole into which the fox disappears and the earlier lines which tell us that 'Something more near / Though deeper within darkness / Is entering the loneliness' (6–8)?
(g) What difference would it make if the poem began with the second stanza ('Through the window I see no star') and ended halfway through the last stanza with 'It enters the dark hole of the *night*'?
(h) Why is the poem called 'The Thought-Fox'?
(i) Why does the poem end with the line 'The page is printed'? What page is printed? And what is printed on it? What do you make of the echo between this line and the fact that we are told that the fox 'Sets neat prints into the snow'?
(j) What assumptions about poetry can you discover in the poem? Are they more like Keats's or more like Simic's?

2. Read the following poem – William Blake's 'The Tyger' – several times and then try to answer the questions that follow; 'The Tyger' appeared in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) as a companion poem to 'The Lamb'.

The Tyger

Tyger tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies 5
Burnt the fire of thy eyes!

On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart? 10
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp, 15
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee? 20

Tyger, Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

(a) What image of the 'tyger' emerges in this poem?
(b) This poem consists of a series of questions – about who made the 'tyger' – that are never explicitly answered. Is there an implicit answer in the questions themselves? Try to decide who or what made the 'tyger' by reading the questions very carefully.
(c) How does the poem suggest the 'tyger' was made? What kind of creative process is implied in the questions?
(d) What kind of creator is implied in the questions?
(e) What kind of relationship between creator and creation do the questions imply?
(f) Is there a general theory of creativity implicit in the poem? Could that general account of the creative process, and the relationship between creator and creation, be applied to the creation of the poem 'The Tyger'?
(g) Blake is normally thought of as a Romantic poet; in what ways might the theory of creativity in this poem be described as a Romantic theory?
(h) The notebook that Blake used between about 1789 and 1818 to draft his poems contains two drafts of 'The Tyger', including the following first draft (words in italics and brackets indicate deletions or alternatives):

Tyger Tyger burning bright
In the forests of the night

What immortal hand [&] or eye
[*Could/Dare*] frame thy fearful symmetry

[*In what/Burnt in*] distant deeps or skies
[*Burnt the/The cruel*] fire of thine eyes
On what wings dare he aspire
What the hand dare seize the fire

And what shoulder & what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart
And when thy heart began to beat
What dread hand & what dread feet

[*Could fetch it from the furnace deep*
And in (the) thy horrid ribs dare steep
In the well of sanguine woe
In what clay & in what mould
Were thy eyes of fury rolld]

[*What/Where*] the hammer [*what/where*] the chain
In what furnace was thy brain
What the anvil what [*the arm/arm/grasp/clasp*] dread grasp
[*Could*] Dare its deadly terrors [*clasp/grasp*] clasp

Tyger tyger burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand & eye
Dare [*form*] frame thy fearful symmetry

And [*did he laugh*] dare he [*smile/laugh*] his work to see
[*What the shoulder (ankle) what the knee*]
[*Did*] Dare he who made the lamb make thee
When the stars threw down their spears
And waterd heaven with their tears

(i) Compare and contrast the first draft with the version that Blake eventually printed, trying to follow the changes that Blake made. Would you say that Blake managed to improve the poem between its first draft and the final version?
(j) What does this exercise indicate about the creation of poetry?
(k) Blake sometimes claimed that his poems were inspired by or dictated to him by spiritual beings. On the evidence of the composition of 'The Tyger', what is your opinion of this claim?
(l) As we saw earlier, in a letter of 27 February 1818, Keats wrote one of the classic statements of the Romantic theory of creativity: 'if Poetry

comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all'. Nonetheless, the drafts of Keats's poetry show that he usually put a great deal of effort into writing and revising his poems.[17] How do you account for this discrepancy between theory and practice in Keats's and Blake's poetry?

3. Here is a selection of the many poems about poetry that have been written in English in all periods. Read as many of them as you can (most of them can be found in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (6th ed.), ed. Ferguson et al.): Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 55' (1609); Anne Bradstreet, 'The Author to Her Book' (1678); William Morris, 'The Earthly Paradise' (1868–70); A.E. Housman, 'Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff …' (1896); Marianne Moore, 'Poetry' (1921); Archibald MacLeish, 'Ars Poetica' (1926); A.R. Ammons, 'Poetics' (1971); John Ashbery, 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' (1981); Tom Wayman, 'What Good Poems Are For' (1980); Leslie Marmion Silko, 'How to Write a Poem about the Sky' (1981); Dana Gioia, 'The Next Poem' (1991); Billy Collins, 'The Trouble with Poetry' (2005).

   Read two or three of these poems several times and try to describe the theory of poetry each one is articulating or the assumptions about poetry which it takes for granted. How do the assumptions in each poem compare with those of Keats and those of Simic?

Notes

1 It is revealing that M.H. Abrams does not provide a definition of 'poetry' in his *Glossary of Literary Terms* (which does define 'novel' and 'drama').
2 For various ways of defining poetry against what it is not, see 'poetry' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 938–41.
3 For an example of such a reading, see Brian Stone, *The Poetry of Keats* (Penguin, 1992).
4 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 37–44 (40).
5 Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (Methuen, 1968), pp. 241–72 (246). 'Organic sensibility' refers to the responsiveness of a person's senses.
6 Although its assumptions and aims have changed since New Criticism, close reading remains at the heart of literary criticism. See Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois, eds, *Close Reading: The Reader* (Duke University Press, 2003), Annette Federico, *Engagements with Close Reading* (Routledge, 2015) and David Greenham, *Close Reading: The Basics* (Routledge, 2018).
7 On the uses and effects of register in literature, see 'Language and Context: Register', in Montgomery et al., *Ways of Reading*, 4th edn. (Routledge, 2013), pp. 87–98 and Lance St John Butler, *Registering the Difference* (Manchester University Press, 1999), Chapters 5, 6, 9 and 10.
8 A good edition of Keats's poems will identify and explain such allusions, but you can also track them down on the internet.
9 On the changing historical meanings of 'imagination', see 'Imagination' in *Princeton* (1993), pp. 566–73.
10 Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, in *Letters of John Keats, A Selection*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 38.
11 Keats to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, in Keats, *Letters*, p. 157.

12 In the letter to Benjamin Bailey referred to above, Keats talks of the 'Wings of imagination' (*Letters*, p. 37).

13 Although 'fancy' and 'imagination' were used interchangeably in the eighteenth century and by many Romantic poets in the early nineteenth century, some critics and theorists – such as Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) – began to distinguish them as referring to quite different creative processes. 'Fancy' was downgraded as a mechanistic process of associating ideas, while 'imagination' became a natural or even semi-divine creative faculty (see 'Fancy' and 'Imagination' in *Princeton* (1993), pp. 401–2 and 566–73). Keats's use of 'fancy' in 'Ode to a Nightingale' to refer to his version of the sympathetic imagination ignores this distinction.

14 New Critical and Post-Structuralist critiques of authorial intention can be found in Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'The Intentional Fallacy', Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' and Michel Foucault's 'What Is an Author?' (all three essays are in V.B. Leitch, ed, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (Norton, 2010)). The revival of interest in authors and authorial intention is examined in Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, third edition (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

15 Keats to John Taylor, 27 February 1818, in *Letters*, p. 70.

16 The most comprehensive and up-to-date anthology of literary theory is Vincent B. Leitch, et al., eds, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, third edition (Norton, 2018). For a collection of twentieth-century theoretical reflections on poetry, see Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900–2000* (Blackwell, 2004).

17 See Robert Gittings, ed., *The Odes of Keats and Their Earliest Known Manuscripts* (Heinemann, 1970) and Jack Stillinger, ed., *John Keats: Poetry Manuscripts at Harvard* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990).

2 Rhythm and Metre

We've All Got Rhythm

In asking the question 'What is poetry?' in Chapter 1, we argued that the only clear-cut difference between poetry and other language uses is that poetry is divided into lines. If this is the defining feature of poetry, from which all else follows, then this must be the first thing we attend to in this book. This means that we need to begin with an investigation of poetic rhythm and metre.

This is a necessary but risky way of beginning. Our experience of teaching poetry suggests that the aspect of studying poetry which causes students the most anxiety is the possibility that they may be required to analyse a poem's prosody (its rhythmic pattern or metre). One of the reasons for this anxiety is that the method of analysis which is usually taught in schools, universities and textbooks adopts a set of terms and assumptions which are alien to poetry in English (they derive from the analysis of metre in classical Greek and Latin poetry). Students are required to divide poetry into 'feet' which are given Greek names and have little to do with the way we experience and derive pleasure from poetic rhythms.[1] We believe that the approach we use in this book – derived from the work of Derek Attridge – is much more user-friendly and appropriate to our experience of poetry.[2] At the same time, however, we recognise that many teachers will expect students to know or use the 'standard' method of analysis. For this reason, we will explain and use the traditional system but also highlight some of its inadequacies.

It is curious that poetic rhythm should cause such unease because rhythm is fundamental to the way we experience life in our bodies. Our heartbeat, our breathing, the way we walk, run, dance and swim are all rhythmical. Rhythm has physical and mental effects upon us which produce aesthetic and even ecstatic experience. When we dance, we move our bodies in rhythmic ways which coincide with the rhythms of music, and this can have a range of pleasurable effects – from those of the waltz to those of a rave. Jogging, swimming and even walking become fully pleasurable only when and if we get into a rhythm.

If we can absorb and gain pleasure from the rhythms of physical movement, dance and music, we need to examine why it is that the question of

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rhythm in poetry causes so much anxiety. One of the answers to this is perhaps that students are not usually given credit for simply enjoying a poem's rhythm or metre but are asked to describe or analyse it in technical terms. Moreover, many people find it difficult to bring to conscious knowledge what they unconsciously 'know' and enjoy. Thus, for example, it is possible to experience the intoxicating, trance-like effect of dancing to house music without ever consciously recognising that it achieves this effect through an almost monotonous use of four-by-four rhythmic patterns (see below). In a similar way, readers may derive pleasure from a poem's use of rhythm without being able to analyse that rhythm. In fact, people find it hard at first even to 'hear' the rhythmic patterns of their everyday speech. The very attempt to become conscious of the way we pronounce a word or phrase can make us unable to hear how we say it or even make us 'forget' how to say it!

We cannot ignore the fact that poems are organised according to rhythmic and metrical principles. Such principles are the reason why poetry is laid out on the page in lines whose length is governed not by the margins of the page (as in prose) but according to a design determined by the poet. This visual difference between poetry and prose is not a trivial fact which we can note and then ignore. Instead, it alerts a reader that he or she is confronted by a poem rather than some other kind of written language. The spatial layout of lines on a page says to the reader 'this is poetry' and, consequently, affects the way he or she reads the words which are organised in this way.

A telling demonstration of this fact occurred to one of the present writers as an undergraduate student in the late 1970s. In a first-year class called 'Practical Criticism', students were presented each week with an anonymous poem to discuss in seminars. One week, we were presented with a poem, as usual, and we spent about 40 minutes analysing it, finding all kinds of subtle and significant things in its figurative language and form. After we had done this, however, the tutor revealed that the 'poem' we had so carefully analysed was in fact a short item from a newspaper which had been rearranged into lines and presented to us as a poem. Rather than feeling that we had been cheated into making fools of ourselves, we realised that we had been coaxed into arriving at an important insight – that the layout on the page (together with the expectations set up by the institutional context) had stimulated us to read this news item as if it were poetry.[3] The general lesson is that the way poetry is laid out on the page acts as a visual signal which causes us to alter the way in which we read. A second and related lesson is that the experience of poetry is partly created by *how* we read as well as by *what* we read.

Written Poetry and the Traces of Poetry's Oral Origins

When we think of poetry as being organised into lines on a page, we are thinking of written poetry. Our experience of poetry in contemporary Western culture is mostly through silent reading. Even when we hear poetry being performed (on recordings, at poetry readings), it is usually read or memorised from

a written text. In the past, however, poetry was also, or even pre-eminently, an oral form (this is still the case in many contemporary cultures): bards and balladeers would entertain at court or act as circulators of news by moving from place to place. Such oral poetry was composed and transmitted mainly by and for people who could not read or write. The oral bards did not necessarily compose their poetry but inherited and transmitted traditional poems which they would modify in performance or in response to events. Such poetry had to be memorised (though not necessarily word-for-word), and various mnemonic devices (aids to memory) were built into the poems themselves. These included ritualistic formulae and different kinds of sound parallelism, such as alliteration, rhyme and metre.

Many of the devices of written poems which we analyse in the classroom (alliteration, rhyme and metre) were, therefore, originally devised to make poetry more memorable for both the bard and the audience. To respond to them, we need either to read poetry out loud or 'hear' it as we silently read. This is especially the case with rhythm and metre. Spoken English, as we will see, is inherently rhythmic, and metre is simply the organisation of the rhythms of the language into regular patterns. As noted in the previous chapter, 'metre' is etymologically related to 'measure'. According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 'measure' has a number of meanings, including the following: (a) a 'measured sound or movement'; (b) 'an air, tune, melody' and 'the time of a piece of music'; (c) 'rhythmical motion, especially as regulated by music'; and (d) 'a grave or stately dance'. These meanings of 'measure' indicate the close relationships between the aural and physical rhythms of poetry, music and dance, but they also suggest why written poetry is laid out on the page in measured lines. Poetic lines on the page are arranged to indicate in a spatial way the rhythms and measures of the poem as it is performed and experienced as sound in time.

Poetry is not, of course, the only kind of discourse which is written in lines. When songs are written down, they are arranged into lines that indicate the patterns of linguistic and musical rhythm. This similarity between songs and poems offers one way of taking some of the mystery out of the question of metre in poetry. Although poetry is increasingly experienced through silent reading, we hear songs everywhere in our culture – as nursery rhymes, hymns and carols, football chants, jingles, pop songs and so on. As children, we experience great pleasure from the rhythm of the stories, rhymes, poems and songs which are read, chanted or sung to us. Yet, as we grow older, many of us lose that immediate pleasure in the rhythms of the texts we read – perhaps because we are taught to get information, excitement or pleasure from the content rather than the form (though if we read regularly to young children, we can regain the skills and pleasures of reading rhythmically). With songs, however, the rhythmic and musical performance of the words is at least as important as what the words say. By listening to a song repeatedly, we absorb and understand (if only in an unconscious way) its rhythmical form. This kind of knowledge can remain with us all our lives.

Have You Got Rhythm?

To test our claim that we've all got rhythm, we would like you to try the following exercise. We have taken the first few lines of a traditional ballad and rearranged them as prose. We would like you to try to arrange them into what you take to be the original lines of the song. We anticipate that most of you will be able to do this – not because you will necessarily know this ballad, but because you will be able to 'hear' how it goes through an unconscious familiarity with the ballad structure. This tacit familiarity comes through exposure to other ballads and the many kinds of songs that are formally similar to ballads. Those readers who know the song which Bob Dylan based upon it – 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' (1963) – will have a head start. In carrying out this exercise, you should read the words out loud or try to 'hear' them in your mind as you read silently.

> 'O where ha' you been, Lord Randal, my son? And where ha' you been, my handsome young man?' 'I ha' been at the greenwood; mother, mak my bed soon, for I'm wearied wi' huntin', and fain wad lie down.' 'And wha met ye there, Lord Randal, my son? And wha met you there, my handsome young man?' 'O I met wi' my true-love; mother, mak my bed soon, for I'm wearied wi' huntin', and fain wad lie down.'

When you have arranged this into lines, we believe that you will also be able to divide the lines up into stanzas. Try it now.

What Is Rhythm?

We need to begin at the beginning by asking what rhythm is. The simple answer is that rhythm occurs whenever there is a regular repetition of similar events which are divided from each other by recognisably different events. A basic visual example of this is a regularly flashing light (like that of a lighthouse) in a binary sequence: light–dark, light–dark, light–dark and so on. An aural example is the regular sound of a bleeper: bleep–quiet, bleep–quiet. Rhythms can occur not only as on–off sequences like these but in a variety of different ways. The only requirement is that there is an alternation between similar but recognisably different events. Walking can become rhythmical because it involves moving alternate legs – the regularity of military marching is achieved through the regimental sergeant-major's rhythmical chanting of 'left–right, left–right, left–right'. (It would be interesting to know whether this makes marching a pleasurable activity; certainly, the use of marching songs helps endurance on long marches.)

The rhythms we have looked at so far involve the sequential alternation of two events – which we can call binary or 'duple' rhythms. (For purposes which will soon become clear, it will be helpful to think of duple rhythm in terms of numbers: 'one–two, one–two, one–two'.) Although there are

more complex rhythms than duple rhythm, they are always composed out of sequences of 'beats' and 'off-beats'. A dance rhythm which may be familiar to some readers is that of the waltz. Beginners learning to dance the waltz need to train their bodies to move according to the waltz rhythm, otherwise they risk the humiliation of continually treading on their partner's toes. The basic rhythm of the waltz is easy enough and is often counted out in the learning process: 'one–two–three, one–two–three.' This is called a triple rhythm, for obvious reasons. But the crucial question to the novice dancer is where the beats and off-beats fall. Beginners are made to hear the beats in the way the numbers are chanted: '**one**–two–three, **one**–two–three, **one**–two–three …'. In this rhythm, the beat is achieved by emphasising 'one' while the off-beats are achieved by giving 'two–three' less emphasis. Because the strong beat comes before the weaker beat, the pattern 'beat/off-beat' is called a 'falling rhythm'. The waltz rhythm can, therefore, be called a 'falling triple rhythm'. (If the stress had fallen on the third element rather than the first – 'one–two–**three**, one–two–**three**' – it would be called a 'rising rhythm'.) Indeed, the relationship between counting and rhythm is programmed into us from our early years in playground games and in the classroom, where multiplication tables are (or used to be) memorised through the rhythms of group chanting – a technique which was so effective that the present writers can still 'hear' the way we chanted the tables (as noted above, rhythmic language can be memorable). The fact that group chanting is always rhythmical reveals the link between rhythm in language and rhythm in music (which is the basis of song). Indeed, the use of counting to establish rhythm is not restricted to learning to waltz – it is a feature of all music and can be used to help coordinate different musicians in a band or orchestra or to work out what 'time signature' a piece of music is in.

We have now gathered all the principles and terms we need to describe most rhythmic sequences. All we need to ask of any rhythm is whether it is (i) duple or triple, and (ii) rising or falling. Thus, in fact, there are four basic kinds of rhythm:

1) rising duple: 'one–**two**, one–**two**';
2) falling duple: '**one**–two, **one**–two';
3) rising triple: 'one–two–**three**, one–two–**three**';
4) falling triple: '**one**–two–three, **one**–two–three'.

The traditional mode of analysing poetic rhythm and metre also identifies these patterns and gives them names derived from the analysis of poetic metre in the classical languages (Greek and Latin):

1) rising duple = 'iambic' rhythm;
2) falling duple = 'trochaic' rhythm;
3) rising triple = 'anapaestic' rhythm;
4) falling triple = 'dactylic' rhythm.

What Is Metre?

Now that we have identified the basic building blocks of rhythm, we only need to add that metrical form (metre) is achieved by controlling the way rhythmic units are combined into groups which are regularly repeated. In English poetry, there are two basic measures or numbers of rhythmic unit per line: four per line and five per line. In traditional metrical analysis, the four-unit line is called a 'tetrameter' (from the Greek for 'four') and the five-unit line is called a 'pentameter' (from the Greek for 'five'). These measures or metres can be illustrated by adapting the counting principles used thus far. If we put an 'and' between numbers, we can establish clearly where beats and off-beats occur because 'and' is rarely given stress in English speech. A rising duple metre consisting of four-beat lines will, therefore, look like this:

> and one and two and three and four
> and five and six and seven eight
> and one and two and three and four
> and five and six and seven eight.

Traditional analysis calls this pattern 'iambic tetrameter'. A four-beat rising triple metre would look like this:

> and a one and a two and a three and a four
> and a five and a six and a seven and eight
> and a one and a two and a three and a four
> and a five and a six and a seven and eight.

In traditional analysis, this is called 'trochaic tetrameter'. If you read these metrical forms out loud (or sound them in your head as you read silently) you should discover that they have a strongly insistent metrical pattern which almost coaxes you into a chant-like rendition. Furthermore, you will perhaps feel that a momentum emerges which seems to insist that all four lines must be chanted to complete the pattern. This pattern of four four-beat lines is very common in poetry and in songs. Following Attridge, we will call it the 'four-by-four' pattern (*Rhythms of English Poetry*, p. 83).

The other major metrical form in poetry in English is the five-beat form in which the lines are measured into rhythmic units of five:

> and one and two and three and four and five
> and six and seven eight and nine and ten

In this example, the metre is five-beat rising duple, which in the traditional analysis is called 'iambic pentameter'. The distinctive feature of five-beat metre is that it does not have the chant-like quality of four-beat metre, nor does it have the latter's tendency to organise itself into groups of four lines. We will examine the consequences of these facts later.

We now have all the basic terms and principles needed for describing poetic metre: we can describe the rhythmic units (e.g., rising duple), and we are able to say whether they are measured out in four-beat lines or five-beat lines.

The Syllable as the Basic Unit of Rhythm in Language

The rhythmic units we have examined above consist of groups of two or three words: 'left–right', 'one–two–three', 'and one and two' and so on, but the basic element of rhythm is not the word but the syllable. We have been able to clarify the principles of rhythmic and metrical form because we have thus far been using one-syllable words (apart from 'seven').

In the analysis of poetic rhythms and metre, it is important to understand what a syllable is and to be able to analyse a multisyllabic word into its component syllables. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that a syllable is 'a vocal sound or set of sounds uttered with a single effort of articulation and forming a word or an element of a word'. This is a crucial definition for understanding rhythm in language because it reminds us that speech is produced through muscular movements of the human body – this is why the rhythms of speech are fundamentally related to the other kinds of rhythms which we produce with our bodies, such as drumming, running or dancing. Each 'effort of articulation' is produced through the combined actions of muscles, lungs, vocal cords and mouth (teeth, tongue, lips). A syllable is the result of a '*single* effort of articulation'. It is, therefore, the basic element of rhythm in speech in just the same way that a step is the basic element of rhythm in walking, marching or running. The fact that a syllable is produced by an effort of articulation is precisely why we are suggesting that you read out loud the examples we are looking at in this chapter (or 'hear' them in your head as you read silently).

To clearly understand what a syllable sounds like (or looks like on the page), it is worth quoting more of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition: a syllable is an element of 'a spoken language comprising a … vowel or vowel equivalent … with or without one or more … consonants or consonant equivalents'. The vowels, you will remember, are the sounds represented by the letters *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* or by combinations of those letters (*ou*, *ie*, etc.) or by 'vowel equivalents' (*y*, for example). A syllable can consist of one vowel on its own – as in one-syllable words such as 'a' and 'I'. More often, a syllable begins or ends with a consonant – as in the following monosyllabic (single-syllable) words: to, be, at, ill, by. More consonants can be added, as follows: sad, sound, creeps, sprints. (Linguists tell us that syllables in English can begin with as many as three consonants and end with as many as four.[4]) But no matter how many consonants are added, such syllables remain single syllables as long as they (i) are 'uttered with a single effort', (ii) form 'a word or an element of a word' and (iii) contain a single vowel sound. (Although the tongue moves in the making of a diphthong sound, it can still be regarded as a single vowel sound.)

But the English language does not consist merely of single-syllable words. Many words are made up of two or more syllables. Two-syllable words such

as 'abstract' or 'holy' require two distinct efforts of the vocal apparatus to pronounce them: ab-stract, ho-ly. Syllables, then, are the basic building elements of words and can be combined to make multisyllabic words of varying numbers of syllables. Such words can, in turn, be analysed into the separate syllables of which they are made: 'multisyllabic' = mul-ti-syl-la-bic. In most instances, poetry will contain a mixture of words of different numbers of syllables.

To be able to see how this works in practice, we need to understand a few more basic facts about the English language. In our analyses of rhythmic units and lines thus far, it is clear where the beats occur in the lines. Most readers will give more emphasis to the numbers rather than the 'ands' in the following line:

> **one** and **two** and **three** and **four**.

For the purpose of analysing poetic rhythm and metre, we say that the numbers in this line are 'stressed' while the 'ands' receive less stress (or are 'unstressed'). Stress occurs when we give extra 'weight' to a syllable – through slightly increasing its duration and/or its loudness or through giving it a slightly higher pitch. We do this automatically – we don't have to think about it. Rhythm is a feature of everyday language use; it's not some mysterious thing confined to poetry or invented by teachers to baffle students. But sometimes, as suggested above, we cannot hear or reproduce consciously what we habitually do without thinking. It's a bit like trying to analyse what we do when we ride a bike or swim.

If we adopt the convention of marking a stressed syllable with '/' above the vowel and an unstressed syllable with '–' above the vowel, we can begin by looking at the way we pronounce some multisyllabic words:

```
– / –     / –      /    –      –  /  – /
eleven   thirteen   fourteen   modernity

 / – / –     –  /   – / –      / –    /
repetition   interpretation   fellowship
```

This analysis reveals that we tend to pronounce multisyllabic words in ways which alternate the stresses and unstresses. This conforms to our definition of rhythm as consisting of regularly alternating events. One of the reasons for this is that speech production is a physical process and, as we have seen, the human body tends to move in rhythmic ways. The successive individual efforts required to produce multisyllabic words tend to alternate in terms of the amount of energy expended (Attridge, *Rhythms of English Poetry*, pp. 64–72).

This rhythmic feature can also be seen when we combine words into sentences:

```
 /    –  –  / –   – / –  –   /      – /  –  – –  / – –  /  –
One of the reasons for this is that speech production is a physical process.
```

Our analysis of the rhythm of this sentence demonstrates several further points. First, we automatically speak in regularly rhythmic ways. Second, rhythm seems to act as a 'carrier' of speech, keeping it moving. Third, although the alternating amounts of effort given to successive syllables is related to the way our bodies produce speech through muscular action, stress patterns in speech are also affected by how 'important' a word is in the sentence. Thus, the 'less important' words – such as 'of', 'the', 'is' – are given less stress here than the 'more important' words, such as 'speech' or the first syllable of 'reasons'. For the same reason, although the word 'this' in the above sentence is in a stress position, it is not likely to receive the same amount of stress as, say, 'speech'. In other words, in contrast to the counting models used above, the amount of stress given to stressed syllables in actual sentences tends to vary. Fourth, this example shows that the stressed syllables are produced at roughly regular intervals in time and that the intervals between stresses may be occupied by a varying number of unstressed syllables. English is therefore called a 'stress-timed' language. In everyday speech we tend to choose rhythmically regular rather than irregular ways of constructing phrases (without necessarily being conscious of the fact):

/ – – / – – / – – /
English is marked by its strong use of stress.

This means that when we do say or hear irregularly stressed phrasing, we are more likely to take notice:

/ / / / /
Its use of strong stress is what marks English.

In this example, rather than being distributed evenly along the line, the stresses are bunched together in 'strong stress' and 'marks English'. This is not an impossible sentence, but its rhythmic – and syntactic – irregularity does draw attention to itself.

The fact that 'everyday' language tends to be rhythmically regular reveals that the difference between poetry and 'ordinary' language use is *not* that one is rhythmic while the other is unrhythmic. The difference, rather, is that poetry shapes the natural rhythms of the language to achieve certain effects. Poetry may, for example, make use of irregular stress patterns precisely because they draw attention to themselves. But the major way in which poetry shapes language rhythms is by arranging rhythmic sequences of words into regular patterns, measured out in lines, to form what we call metre.

Different Measures

The standard method of analysing metre, as represented by Jon Stallworthy's essay on 'Versification' at the back of the fifth edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2005), points out four different ways that poets measure their lines. Two of them – syllabic metre (which maintains a constant number of syllables

per line) and quantitative metre (which attempts to make the duration of every line the same) – have been experimented with in English poetry but with limited success. In 'accentual' or 'strong-stress metre', as its name suggests, the number of stresses per line is held constant (usually four) while the overall number of syllables can vary. Alliterative accentual metre was the measure of Old English (Anglo-Saxon) poetry but, according to Stallworthy, was 'increasingly supplanted' after the Norman Conquest of 1066 'by the metrical patterns of Old French poetry'. Although he goes on to say that 'the non-alliterative four-stress line would have a long and lively continuing life', he mentions only Coleridge's 'Christabel', section 2 of Eliot's 'The Dry Savages', Richard Wilbur's 'Junk' and Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* (p. 2029). The bulk of Stallworthy's essay is given over to an analysis of 'accentual-syllabic metre', which 'provided the metrical structure of the new poetry to emerge in the fourteenth century' (p. 2030) and became, he implies, the major metrical form in English literary poetry ever since. In accentual-syllabic metre, as its name indicates, both the number of accents (i.e., stresses) and the overall number of syllables per line are held constant. It appears in rising and falling sequences, in duple and triple forms and in four-stress and five-stress patterns. Traditional methods of metrical analysis concentrate on accentual-syllabic metre and claim that 'its basic unit was the foot, a combination of two or three stressed and/or unstressed syllables' (p. 2030). Stallworthy goes on to name, describe and illustrate the four basic 'feet' – iambic, trochaic, anapaestic and dactylic.

One way of beginning the analysis of a poem's metre, then, is to make two simple measurements: (i) count the total number of syllables per line; (ii) count the number of stresses per line. If the number of syllables and stresses per line is constant, then you are probably reading an example of accentual-syllabic verse, and the ratio of stresses to syllables will indicate whether it is iambic/trochaic (1:2 or duple) or anapaestic/dactylic (1:3 or triple) rhythm. If there are five stresses per line, you are probably reading iambic pentameter; if four, you are reading iambic tetrameter or trochaic tetrameter. If, however, the number of syllables and stresses per line is not constant, which may happen quite frequently, then the standard system for analysing metre will not help you. You may be reading free verse (see below) or accentual verse, but if you experience a strong, swinging metrical pulse despite the variation in stresses and syllables you may well be reading what Attridge calls a 'dolnik' poem, whose metre is based on beats not stresses (see below).

In what follows, we want to demonstrate that there are only two basic metrical lines in English poetry – five stress (or five beat) and four beat lines.

Five-Stress Accentual-Syllabic Verse: Iambic Pentameter

Most five-beat verse is formed out of rising, duple rhythmic units. In traditional terminology, this metre is called 'iambic pentameter'. Iambic pentameter is relatively easy to 'measure': if all or most of the lines of a poem contain ten syllables and five stresses, then it is almost certainly iambic pentameter.

Because it controls the total number of syllables in a line, as well as the number of stresses, iambic pentameter is an example of accentual-syllabic verse:

– / – / – / – / – /
and one and two and three and four and five

– / – / – / – / – /
and six and seven, eight and nine and ten

If these were real lines of poetry, traditional metrical analysis would divide them into five iambic 'feet' as follows:

– / – / – / – / – /
and six | and se | ven, eight | and nine | and ten

The division of 'and seven, eight' into feet in this way reveals one of the problems with traditional analysis, as it shows that 'feet' often fail to correspond to the actual language of lines. A real example can be seen in the first line of 'Ode to a Nightingale':

– / / – – / – / – /
My heart | aches, and | a drow | sy numb | ness pains

Here, again, the division into feet shreds the sense of this line. The stress pattern indicates that the second foot does not match the expected iambic sequence, a feature that traditional analysis would describe as a 'reversed' foot, suggesting that a trochaic foot has substituted for the expected iambic foot. Such modulations are quite common in iambic pentameter, which is one of the ways that it escapes metronymic regularity.

Iambic pentameter is a hugely important metrical line found almost exclusively in 'literary' poetry. A great deal of the major poetry and poetic drama of the English literary 'canon' from the fourteenth to the early twenty-first century is written in iambic pentameter, rhymed and unrhymed, in various stanza lengths (including the sonnet), in verse paragraphs and in continuous verse. Particularly in the form of blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), this dynamically flexible metrical form can produce the effect of an individual speaking voice simultaneously with a sense of heightened dignity. No doubt, this flexibility and subtlety is one reason why Shakespeare used it as the dominant form in his plays.

Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall' (1914) is a good example of how iambic pentameter can create the impression of spontaneous vernacular speech or thought that is subtly heightened:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,

And spills the upper boulder in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there. (1–11)

There are various formal features in these lines that combine to create the impression of conversational informality. In addition to using blank verse, they employ enjambment (run-on lines) and caesura (mid-line syntactic breaks). There are punctuated syntactic pauses of various kinds – commas, semicolons, colons and full stops – at the end of all the lines except the enjambment at the end of line 6. The lines contain three sentences: the first starts at the beginning of line 1 and concludes at the end of line 4, but the second ends and the third begins in the middle of line 9, creating a strong mid-line caesura. The relationship between lines and syntax is, therefore, continuously varying. In addition, there is subtle interplay between the natural rhythms of speech and the underlying metrical pattern. We see this from the beginning:

```
  /      –      – /  –   /  –  /  – /
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 b         -o-    b  o  b  o  b  o  b
```

It is quite common for iambic pentameter poems to begin the first line, as here, with a stressed syllable and, hence, a beat before settling into the iambic metrical pattern in the rest of the line. It would be a mistake to make the line conform to a metre which has not yet, of course, been established as a pattern of expectation. A performance like the following would not sound like thought or speech: 'Some**thing** there **is** that **does**n't **love** a **wall'**. The metrical pattern is quickly established in the following lines, and this allows for subtle tensions between speech rhythms and metre in lines 10–11:

```
  / –   – /    –    /  –   /    –    /
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
  o b   o b    o    b  o   b    o    b
```

```
 – –  /   / –  /   – /   –   /
But at spring mending-time we find them there
  o b   o    b  o   b   o b   o    b
```

In the first of these lines (line 10), the natural pronunciation of '**No** one' is indicated by the stress marks above the line, but the metrical pattern marked below the line might induce us to say it as 'No **one**'. A performance that is attentive to this tension might hover, as it were, between the two realisations. To give more emphasis to the metre ('No **one**') would, in Attridge's terms, involve 'demoting' the normally stressed syllable ('No') to form an off-beat and 'promoting' 'one' to form a beat. More tangible tensions are at work in line 11 where 'spring' would normally be stressed but is in an off-beat position in the line. The metrical pattern would, therefore, induce us to demote 'spring' as an off-beat and promote 'at' as a beat. This creates tangible tension between natural speech and metre, which needs to be negotiated in performance (there is no 'correct' solution – it's a matter of interpretation) and contributes to the subtle 'heightening' of ordinary speech that iambic pentameter produces.

The origins of iambic pentameter in English poetry lie in Chaucer's attempt in the fourteenth century to imitate the metrical forms of medieval Italian poets such as Dante and Petrarch. Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* is perhaps the first significant poem in English to use decasyllabic (i.e., 10-syllable) rhyming couplets, which he used in most of his subsequent poems, including *The Canterbury Tales*. But the form fell out of use, and changes in the pronunciation of English meant that later readers found it difficult to scan Chaucer's verse. Iambic pentameter was reintroduced in the Early Modern or Renaissance period (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) by poets such as Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–47), who used it in sonnets with intricate rhyme schemes (see Chapter 13). Surrey also invented English blank verse, based on Italian models, in his translation of two books of Virgil's *Aeneid* (1539–46). The flexibility of blank verse made it the staple metrical form of Renaissance verse drama, with writers such as Christopher Marlowe paving the way for Shakespeare. Yet, it is notable that many dramatists of the period (including Shakespeare) frequently shift between prose and blank verse (and sometimes employ four-beat rhymed verse and songs). Often, but not always, blank verse is assigned only to the 'noble' characters or used when a certain formality of utterance is required.

Although blank verse came to dominate English Renaissance drama, Surrey's use of blank verse in poetry attracted few imitators. The use of iambic pentameter in rhyming couplets (*aa, bb*) became standard in the late sixteenth century for long poems, such as Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (1598). More than a century after Surrey's use of blank verse in his translation of Virgil's Latin epic, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) became the first major English epic in blank verse. In a preface to the second edition (1674), Milton celebrated the 'liberty' of blank verse for the way it escapes the 'bondage of rhyming' and, hence, posited a link between poetic and political liberty. Milton's use of blank verse in *Paradise Lost*, together with his exploitation of the elasticity of iambic pentameter and English syntax, set a precedent which later had enormous influence on the development of poetry in English (as we shall see in later chapters).

Yet, *Paradise Lost*'s bid for freedom did not immediately inspire other poets to throw off the 'bondage' of rhyme. Most poets in the Neoclassical period (roughly from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century) continued to use rhymed iambic pentameter, often in 'heroic couplets' (so-called because of their frequent use in epic poems) or in 'closed couplets'. Closed couplets can be seen at work in Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1709):

> A little learning is a dangerous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.
> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
> And drinking largely sobers us again. (215–18)

In these lines, the units of meaning (the phrases and sentences) coincide neatly with the metrical form. Each sentence is bound up within a rhyming couplet, and the line breaks coincide with the division of each sentence into phrasal units. This does not mean, however, that Pope's verse is at all 'wooden'. Within the constraining template of the metrical and grammatical structure, there is a degree of flexible interplay between speech rhythms and metrical form. In the first of these lines, the natural stresses of 'A little learning' and 'a dangerous thing' emphatically realise the iambic beat (compressing 'dangerous' into two syllables), while the unstressed 'is' in the position of the line's third beat is much less prominent. The second line has a more complex relation to iambic pentameter: although the mild caesura after 'deep' coincides with the metre, the whole line is difficult to scan. We would normally want to stress both words in 'drink deep', but this would break with the iambic pentameter pattern; 'taste not' is another difficult phrase in the context of this line because the natural pronunciation (stressing 'taste'), though it correlates with the line's metrical requirements, does not match the emphasis of the line (where 'not' needs to be stressed); and at the end of the line 'Pierian spring', with its stress–unstress–unstress–stress pronunciation, also creates tensions with the meter. In contrast, the next couplet fits quite neatly into iambic pentameter. The overall effect, then, is a sense of measured liberty – of limited flexibility within a highly structured framework. We will see in Chapter 11 that this formal effect correlates with Pope's political ideology as well as exemplifying the constraints he is recommending to fellow poets (in Greek mythology, the Pierian spring was one of the haunts of the Muses and a fount of knowledge and inspiration: this is another poem about poetry).

But if the closed couplet is appropriate to the constraint of the 'conservative' thought of the Neoclassical period, Romanticism's emphasis on poetic and political liberty 'opened up' the couplet once more – as in the opening lines of Keats's *Endymion* (1818):

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; it will never